



## FROM CRIMINAL TRIBES TO DENOTIFIED COMMUNITIES: THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES OF THE NARIKKURAVAR IN TAMIL NADU AND THE PARDHI IN MADHYA PRADESH

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the historical criminalization and contemporary struggles of the Narikkuravar in Tamil Nadu and the Pardhi in Madhya Pradesh, two communities designated as “criminal tribes” under the British colonial Criminal Tribes Act (1871). Drawing on archival sources, ethnographic accounts and legal-political developments, the study adopts a comparative-historical framework to analyse how colonial mechanisms of control rooted in surveillance, forced sedentarization and cultural erasure have left enduring legacies of stigma and marginalization. The paper situates this analysis within broader theoretical perspectives, including Labelling Theory, Foucauldian biopolitics and Subaltern Studies, to argue that the criminal tribe label was less about actual crime and more about disciplining non-conforming, mobile populations. Despite the Act’s repeal in 1952, postcolonial legal and bureaucratic systems have reproduced similar logics through instruments like the Habitual Offenders Act and discriminatory policing. Yet, both communities have developed distinct pathways of resistance and assertion. While the Narikkuravar have recently secured Scheduled Tribe status through sustained political mobilization, the Pardhi continue to face state violence and social exclusion. The paper highlights the role of community organizations, youth activism and cultural revival in challenging inherited stigmas and reshaping identities. Ultimately, the study calls for structural policy reforms and inclusive scholarship to support the full civic integration and dignity of Denotified Tribes in India.*

**KEYWORDS:** Criminal Tribes Act, Denotified Tribes, Narikkuravar, Pardhi, colonialism, labelling theory, subaltern resistance.

### INTRODUCTION

The classification of certain communities as “criminal tribes” under British colonial rule represents one of the most enduring and damaging legacies of colonial governance in India. Enacted in 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) institutionalized the belief that some communities were “criminal by birth,” legitimizing systemic surveillance, forced settlement and cultural erasure. Among those targeted were the Narikkuravar of Tamil Nadu and the Pardhi of Madhya Pradesh two semi-nomadic groups whose traditional livelihoods and mobility came to be pathologized as threats to colonial order. While the CTA was formally repealed in 1952 and replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act, its underlying logic of suspicion and control continues to inform how these communities are perceived and governed in postcolonial India. This paper examines the historical trajectories and contemporary struggles of the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities through a comparative-historical framework. It

situates their criminalization within broader processes of colonial classification, biopolitical control, and postcolonial marginalization. Drawing on archival sources, ethnographic narratives, and recent policy developments, the study explores how colonial stigmas persist in new forms through surveillance, police violence, bureaucratic exclusion, and cultural stereotypes. At the same time, it highlights emerging forms of resistance, self-assertion, and community mobilization, especially in the realms of education, legal activism, and cultural revival.

By placing the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities side by side, this paper aims to uncover both common patterns and regional specificities in how the colonial state and its legacies continue to shape lived realities. It argues that understanding these communities requires not only a critique of historical injustice but also attention to how these groups are reclaiming voice and visibility within India's evolving legal and political landscape. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on caste, tribe, citizenship and the afterlives of colonial governance.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Labelling Theory, Foucauldian biopolitics and governmentality, and Subaltern Studies to examine how the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities were criminalized, surveilled and how they resist these legacies.

### • Labelling and Stigma

Howard Becker's Labelling Theory (1963) explains how deviance is socially constructed. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 institutionalized stigma by labelling communities as "criminal by birth." Goffman's concept of stigma (1963) highlights how this label persists socially despite legal denotification in 1952. This lens reveals how state-imposed identities lead to enduring exclusion and how communities respond by negotiating or resisting these labels.

### • Biopolitics and Governmentality

Michel Foucault's concepts show how colonial regimes-controlled populations not just through punishment but via regulation of life, labour and movement. The CTA's reformatory settlements, surveillance and forced sedentarization reflect biopolitical control. Governmentality helps explain the colonial state's efforts to make nomadic groups like the Narikkuravar and Pardhi visible, governable and taxable.

### • Subaltern Resistance

Drawing from Subaltern Studies (Guha, Chatterjee) and postcolonial theory (Spivak), this study highlights the everyday resistance of marginalized communities. Practices like preserving Vagriboli, mobile livelihoods and oral traditions are read as acts of agency. These frameworks centre community voices and critique how colonial classifications still shape modern legal and bureaucratic systems.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comparative-historical qualitative approach to examine the criminalization and postcolonial trajectories of the Narikkuravar community in Tamil Nadu and the Pardhi community in Madhya Pradesh. The methodological framework is rooted in historical sociology, ethnographic interpretation and discourse analysis, combining archival research with contemporary field-based insights.

### 1. Archival and Historical Sources

To trace the colonial construction of "criminal tribes," the study relies on:

- Legislative texts including the Criminal Tribes Act (1871, 1911, 1924) and its amendments.
- Government reports, particularly colonial census records, Madras and Central Provinces gazetteers, and administrative correspondences.

- Records from the British Home Department and Police/Revenue departments accessed through secondary compilations.
- Legal reviews and documentation of the denotification process post-1952 and the emergence of the Habitual Offenders Act.

These sources provide insights into how colonial classification systems functioned to pathologize mobility and justify surveillance.

## 2. Secondary Literature and Scholarly Analysis

The paper engages deeply with:

- Postcolonial studies on state power and classification (e.g., works by Foucault, Guha, Pandey).
- Anthropological and sociological studies on Denotified Tribes (DNTs) and their marginalization.
- Academic journals, edited volumes and policy reports focusing on criminalization, caste, mobility and social stigma.

These sources help contextualize the primary material within broader scholarly debates.

## 3. Field-Based Observations and Ethnographic Reports

To explore the contemporary socio-political realities of both communities:

- NGO reports
- Testimonies and case studies from community members, activists, and fieldworkers.
- Media interviews, documentary evidence and civil society publications.

While the study does not rely on first-hand ethnographic fieldwork, it incorporates ethnographic narratives and community-authored accounts to foreground lived experiences and community responses.

## 4. Comparative Framework

A case-comparative model is employed to draw out both the commonalities and divergences in the trajectories of the Narikkuravar and Pardhi. This involves:

- Identifying shared experiences of colonial stigmatization.
- Comparing differential access to rights, welfare and recognition in the postcolonial state.
- Examining how each community's cultural strategies (language, occupation, public representation) shaped their political mobilization.

This methodological choice enables a nuanced understanding of how a uniform colonial policy (the CTA) produced regionally specific outcomes in the long run.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the community's histories and their current marginalization, care has been taken to:

- Avoid reproducing stereotypes.
- Cite community voices and organizations respectfully.
- Acknowledge structural violence without essentializing the communities.

## Colonial Construction of Criminal Tribes

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 was fundamentally shaped by the British colonial administration's perceptions of Indian society, particularly its understanding of mobility, caste and crime. Driven by a colonial vision of India as an "exoticized *'jewel in the crown'*," the British felt a compelling need to classify and control its diverse Indigenous inhabitants. This imperative led to the formal codification of the category of "criminal tribe," encompassing a wide array of communities based on perceived markers of religion, caste and 'tribe.' At the core of this legislation was the belief in "congenital criminality" an idea rooted in Indian jurisprudence that viewed criminality as hereditary, with criminals belonging to "like-minded fraternities." This notion was reinforced by contemporary

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criminological discourse in Britain, which, influenced by Darwinian theories of evolution, further propagated the belief that criminal behaviour was genetically inherited.

Following the 1857 revolt, the British administration adopted a so-called “scientific approach” to classifying criminal behaviour, concluding that “hereditary” and “habitual” criminals inherently populated Indian society. This pseudo-scientific framework was strategically employed to justify the enactment and expansion of the CTA. By linking criminality with “race and ethnicity” and integrating it with pre-existing, rigid notions of caste, the British could present their discriminatory policies as rational and necessary. This reflects the colonial co-optation of emerging “scientific” theories to legitimize exploitative policies naturalizing a system designed for social control and resource extraction.

The Act itself was a direct and significant response to the widespread unrest following the 1857 revolt an event during which many tribal chiefs were branded as traitors and rebels. The colonial government struggled to manage various mobile groups, including wandering tribes, vagrants, itinerants and eunuchs, collectively labelling them a pervasive “law and order problem.” A key legal precedent for the CTA was the Thuggee Act of 1836, which controversially permitted convictions based solely on affiliation with a perceived criminal group, without requiring evidence of an actual crime. For both rhetorical and administrative purposes, the colonial administration deliberately preferred the term ‘tribe’ over ‘caste.’ The term ‘tribe’ more effectively evoked associations with “wildness” and “savagery,” enabling further dehumanization and easier control of these communities. The initial and primary targets of the CTA were explicitly identified as “itinerant and wandering communities” and “non-sedentary communities.” British officials repeatedly expressed frustration at their inability to manage these mobile populations, often citing their “nomadic lifestyle” as a primary reason for criminal classification.

Historical accounts further suggest that mobile populations posed a particular challenge to the colonial state’s efforts at taxation and proselytization. Their “hit-and-run” tactics were associated with guerrilla warfare and seen as a direct threat to British authority. This reveals that the criminalization of nomadic communities was not merely about crime control it was a calculated move to dismantle a mode of life that resisted colonial governance. Mobility threatened the colonial administrative apparatus by impeding revenue collection and undermining comprehensive social control. By labelling mobile groups as “criminal,” the British aimed to suppress this resistance, forcing them into sedentary settlements where they could be more easily monitored, enumerated, and exploited for their labour thereby consolidating colonial power over both people and resources.

### **CTA- Implementation and Classification**

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) established a comprehensive framework for the registration, intensive surveillance, and stringent control of members of the designated “criminal tribes.” It imposed severe restrictions on their movement and criminalized many of their traditional occupations. Once a community was officially notified as criminal, district magistrates were legally obligated to maintain detailed records of all its members. Their movements were meticulously monitored through a system of mandatory registration and travel passes, which dictated where individuals could live and move. Adult males from these communities were compelled to report to local police stations weekly or in some cases, even twice daily.

The British government also created “special settlements” for these communities, which functioned as open-air prisons. Within these confines, residents were subjected to harsh disciplinary measures, including imprisonment, shackling, caning and flogging. One of the most egregious aspects of the Act was its provision to separate children aged 4 to 18 from their families, placing them in “reformatory” schools or settlements. The stated goal was to “reclaim” them, with the explicit hope that “the criminal habits of the tribe would in the course of a generation or two be entirely eradicated.” Furthermore, members of these criminalized tribes were often forced to perform hard labour in mills, factories, mines, quarries, and plantations. These policies reveal that the criminalization of these communities was not simply a punitive response to crime but served multiple strategic functions for

the colonial state. The narrative of a “law and order problem” frequently served as a smokescreen to obscure deeper political and economic motivations. By branding marginalized communities as inherently criminal, the British justified intense surveillance and control, transforming them into a readily available and exploitable labour force, while also suppressing the perceived threat posed by their mobile, autonomous lifestyles.

Initially, the application of the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) was geographically limited, focused primarily on North India especially the Punjab, North-Western Provinces, and Oudh. Over time, the Act scope expanded: it was extended to the Bengal Presidency in 1876 and eventually implemented in the Madras Presidency by 1911. In Madras, the provincial government identified as many as sixty-eight castes as criminal, with the Kuravar community (a broader category often including the Narikkuravars) alone accounting for over twenty classifications. By 1931, the colonial government had listed 237 criminal castes and tribes in the Madras Presidency.

The Act underwent several amendments in 1897, 1911, and 1924 each expanding its geographic reach, increasing its punitive capabilities, and refining its mechanisms of control. These revisions illustrate the adaptive and increasingly comprehensive nature of colonial governance across regions and over time.

**Table 1: Key Provisions and Impacts of the Criminal Tribes Act (1871–1924)**

Year of Act/ Amendment	Key Provisions	Geographical Scope	Stated Purpose	Actual Impact	Example Communities Targeted
1871	Compulsory registration, movement restrictions, weekly reporting, forced settlements, separation of children	North India (Punjab, NWP & Oudh)	Control habitual criminals, prevent crime	Social exclusion, systemic discrimination, economic hardship, dehumanization, hereditary stigma Itinerant and wandering communities	Banjaras, Kolis, Pardhis, Sansis, Hijras, Gujjars, Lodhis, Chamars, Sanyasis, hill tribes
1876	Extended application of the 1871 Act	Bengal Presidency	Control habitual criminals, prevent crime	Increased surveillance, discrimination, hardship	Various communities in Bengal
1897	Empowered local governments to create reformatory settlements for boys (aged 4–18)	British India	“Reform” Indigenous boys	Forced separation from families, coercive “rehabilitation”	Indigenous boys from criminalized tribes
1911	Further extension of the Act; increased police powers; registration not linked to livelihood	Madras Presidency	Enlarge police authority, identify criminal tribes	Criminalization of traditional occupations, forced resettlement, long-term stigma	Kuravar (including Narikkuravar), Kallar, Maravar; sixty-eight castes listed in Tamil Nadu; 237 by 1931.
1924	Consolidated all amendments; added fingerprinting, increased penalties	All British India	Strengthen state control, prevent future revolts	Intensified surveillance, deeper stigmatization, loss of civil liberties	Millions across 127 communities.

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This table provides a clear and structured overview of the CTA's legal evolution, making it easier to understand its multifaceted character. By juxtaposing "Key Provisions" with their "Actual Impact," it becomes evident that colonial legislation went far beyond crime prevention it entrenched social marginalization and long-lasting stigma. The table also highlights how the shared legal and administrative framework of the CTA led to the systemic criminalization of communities like the Narikkuravar and Pardhi, setting the stage for the comparative case studies that follow. Understanding this historical context is crucial for analysing how a uniform colonial policy manifested in regionally specific ways, producing distinct experiences of marginalization and control.

### **Case Study I: The Narikkuravar of Tamil Nadu**

#### **Ethnographic Background**

The Narikkuravars are a semi-nomadic community primarily residing in Tamil Nadu, often identified as "gypsy" people with potential Romani roots. Their name, derived from nary (fox/jackal) and Kuravar (people), directly reflects their traditional occupation as hunters of foxes and jackals. Historically, their livelihood was deeply intertwined with hunting, a practice that sustained them for generations. However, with the implementation of the Wildlife Protection Act first by the British and later by independent India this occupation was outlawed, compelling them to adapt economically. As a result, many Narikkuravars shifted to selling handmade beaded jewellery, inexpensive plastic goods and other small wares, particularly at festivals and temple sites. Some members of the community have also resorted to garbage collection as a means of survival. The Narikkuravars speak Vagriboli, an unscripted Indo-Aryan dialect that incorporates elements from Tamil, Telugu and Marathi. This language is actively preserved through everyday use and is a key marker of their cultural identity. Their nomadic lifestyle characterized by continual travel in search of markets has significantly limited their access to stable housing, healthcare, and formal education. Children often accompany adults on these migrations, resulting in high dropout rates and poor educational outcomes.

#### **Colonial Labelling and Control**

The Narikkuravars were brought under the purview of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 a classification that explicitly marked them as a perceived "threat to Indian society under British rule." While the original CTA was initially enforced in North India, it was extended to the Madras Presidency in 1911, under which the Narikkuravars were officially criminalized. The Madras provincial government, in its efforts to suppress so-called "criminal dynasties," identified sixty-eight castes as criminal, with the Kuravar community (a broader classification often encompassing the Narikkuravars) alone comprising more than 20 of these groups. This classification was less a reflection of actual criminal behaviour and more a result of the Narikkuravars mobile lifestyle and their nonconformity to settled, taxable existence something the colonial administration viewed with deep suspicion. Their traditional trades and movement patterns conflicted with the British desire for a fixed, governable, and easily monitored population. The CTA imposed severe social and economic hardships on the Narikkuravars, including restricted movement, forced registration and surveillance. The Act infringed on their basic freedoms and privacy. While specific records of colonial-era forced settlements exclusive to the Narikkuravars are limited, the general provisions of the CTA mandated confinement in "special settlements," where criminalized communities endured harsh conditions, forced labour, and physical punishment.

The criminal label imposed by the CTA left a deep and lasting stigma on the Narikkuravars, persisting long after the Act was repealed in 1952. This societal branding led to their being perceived as "dirty," loud, uneducated, and even accused of eating cats, views that contributed to their continued social ostracization. The intersection of state-sponsored criminalization with pre-existing caste-based prejudices created a "double burden" of marginalization. The Narikkuravars fight for dignity and inclusion thus required navigating both legal oppression and entrenched social discrimination simultaneously.

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### Community Responses: Resistance and Adaptation

Despite state pressure, the Narikkuravars displayed forms of resistance to colonial sedentarization efforts from early on. Their continued nomadic lifestyle in the face of increasing restrictions can be interpreted as a form of implicit resistance to colonial control and taxation. This resistance was not always overt or confrontational; rather, the preservation of core cultural practices especially mobility and linguistic identity functioned as subtle yet powerful acts of defiance. Language preservation was central to their cultural resilience. Vagriboli remained a vibrant oral language within the community, allowing them to maintain cultural cohesion and a sense of identity despite external pressures.

Following the criminalization of hunting under the Forest and Wildlife Protection Acts, Narikkuravars pragmatically adapted by shifting to other itinerant trades such as bead-selling. While these occupations lacked social prestige, they allowed the community to maintain their mobile way of life and avoid total incorporation into settled labour systems. Their historical retreat into forests both for livelihood and to escape colonial policing also highlights an adaptive strategy of spatial evasion. The colonial policing system was highly repressive, often overriding indigenous justice mechanisms. Any defiance of colonial norms however legitimate within local traditions was redefined as criminal. The Narikkuravars inherent mobility made them particularly difficult to surveil, tax, and govern. This difficulty was a key reason for their criminalization. Yet, their continued movement even under restrictive laws signals a persistent, often covert, assertion of their autonomy.

Their adaptive mobility driven by both necessity and cultural values functioned as a form of resistance to the colonial project of control. Though not confrontational in a conventional political sense, such acts reflect a deeper struggle to retain identity and agency within a repressive colonial framework.

### Case Study II: The Pardhi of Madhya Pradesh Community Overview

The Pardhi are a Hindu tribal community primarily found in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, with smaller populations in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The name Pardhi is derived from the Marathi word *Pardh*, meaning "hunting," which underscores their historical identity as hunters. The community comprises various subgroups, including the Vaghri Pardhi, Phase Pardhi, Pal Pardhi, Gav Pardhi, Shikari Pardhi, and Takankar. Historically, the Pardhis were renowned for their exceptional hunting skills and deep forest knowledge. They were adept in the use of traditional weaponry such as bows, arrows, swords and complex hunting traps. Their expertise also extended to guerrilla warfare, making them a formidable presence during the Revolt of 1857 and subsequent regional uprisings. During the British Raj, they were often employed in royal tiger hunts and gained further recognition for their ability to train now-extinct Asiatic cheetahs, which they kept as hunting companions. Notably, the Gav-Paradhi subgroup primarily agriculturalists largely avoided being labelled a "criminal tribe," highlighting how a shift in livelihood could alter colonial classification. This internal variation within the Pardhi community reflects how colonial systems categorized and controlled communities based on perceived economic utility and conformity to settled norms.

### Colonial Criminalization

The Pardhis were explicitly criminalized under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which branded them as criminals by birth due to their caste and their long-standing association with hunting and forest life. Their traditional livelihood including hunting, foraging and the use of forest resources was systematically outlawed under a series of colonial forest laws, most notably the Indian Forest Act of 1878. The colonial administration viewed their "outlawed existence in the bush" as a direct challenge to state authority and control over natural resources. Colonial and popular media narratives often amplified the criminalization of the Pardhis, exaggerating their threat to wildlife and public order. Such representations tied their "criminal tribe" designation to poaching activities, framing their cultural knowledge and traditional practices as threats rather than assets. This illustrates how colonial power

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reshaped indigenous identities: what had once been valuable survival knowledge and warfare expertise became, under the new regime, grounds for punishment and exclusion.

Driven by the goal of asserting state control over forests and tribal territories, British policies systematically turned Indigenous livelihoods into liabilities. The result was a profound paradox: the same forest knowledge and hunting skills that had previously elevated the Pardhis' status made them targets of systematic repression under colonial law. The Pardhis were also frequent scapegoats in colonial policing, especially in unsolved cases of theft or dacoity. They were often the first suspects in crimes for which there was no evidence and were routinely subjected to police brutality and arbitrary detention. This scapegoating reinforced their social status as pariahs and fuelled a vicious cycle: social prejudice led to surveillance and marginalization, which in turn forced some members into survival-based activities that reaffirmed the public's negative stereotypes.

Colonial policing, often described as possessing a "Brahminical character," deliberately targeted socio-economically vulnerable communities like the Pardhis as "proper objects of policing." This functioned as a broader tool of governance: by designating specific groups as inherently criminal, the colonial state justified the expansion of its repressive policing apparatus. Through this mechanism, state power could be visibly and violently asserted, creating a spectacle of order even as it perpetuated profound social injustice and deepened the economic deprivation of marginalized populations.

### **State Repression and Migration**

As the colonial state tightened its control over forests and land, the Pardhis who relied on these resources were displaced from their traditional territories. Denied access to hunting grounds and forest produce, many faced destitution. Some, driven by desperation, turned to petty theft and poaching as survival strategies. Rejected by settled communities and denied access to education and formal settlement, many Pardhis continued their nomadic lifestyle, targeting high-value wildlife in response to growing market demand. This persistence, despite criminalization, reveals not only economic necessity but also cultural resilience. In postcolonial India, the legacy of criminalization continues. Many Pardhis today live in precarious economic conditions, working as low-paid daily wage labourers in both urban and rural areas. Others rely on street vending selling inexpensive goods such as plastic toys or Chinese products or take up roles as "human scarecrows" on farms. A significant number of child beggars in cities like Mumbai are from the Pardhi community, highlighting the enduring cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Their continued mobility, often due to lack of formal documentation or legal residence, has made them difficult to track and include in welfare schemes. The stigma of criminality, compounded by their itinerant existence, continues to deny them full access to citizenship, education, and healthcare. In context, the Gav-Pardhi subgroup, by shifting to agriculture and adopting settled life during colonial rule, was able to establish formal land rights and escape some of the most damaging effects of the CTA. This divergent trajectory underscores the importance of economic adaptation in shaping both colonial classification and postcolonial outcomes.

### **Comparative Analysis: Narikkuravar and Pardhi Similarities**

The historical trajectories of the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities reveal striking similarities rooted in the colonial construction of criminality. Both were subjected to the pervasive reach of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), which designated them as "criminal by birth" based on perceived hereditary tendencies and their nomadic lifestyles. This colonial categorization led to intrusive surveillance, severe restrictions on mobility and the criminalization of their traditional occupations, including hunting, foraging and mobile trading. In the post-independence era, both communities have continued to experience systemic marginalization and poverty. Despite the formal repeal of the CTA in 1952, the deep-seated stigma associated with their past legal status has persisted. This enduring social prejudice has resulted in continued discrimination, limited access to education, healthcare, housing and employment opportunities. As a result, both the Narikkuravars and Pardhis

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have engaged in sustained struggles for social recognition and political inclusion, actively advocating for improved legal status, equitable access to state welfare schemes and protection from police harassment.

## **DIFFERENCES**

Despite these overarching parallels, significant differences emerge in how the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities have navigated the postcolonial Indian state, shaped by regional political dynamics, degrees of social organization and access to state resources.

### **1. Political Mobilization and State Engagement**

The Narikkuravars in Tamil Nadu have engaged in a long and highly organized campaign to secure Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Their mobilization included protests, hunger strikes and appeals to both national and international bodies, culminating in their recent reclassification from Most Backward Class (MBC) to ST. This shift has opened avenues for greater access to reservations in education, employment and political representation.

In contrast, the Pardhis of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra continue to face more direct and violent forms of state repression. Instances of custodial violence, false implication in crimes, and targeted surveillance by forest and police officials have been well-documented. The Pardhis legal resistance has focused more on contesting individual injustices and combating ongoing criminalization rather than on broader political reclassification.

### **2. Cultural Representation and Public Discourse**

The Narikkuravars have actively worked to distance themselves from the historical label of "criminal tribe," strategically engaging with media, academic researchers and civil society to promote a positive cultural identity. Their efforts include the preservation of their language (Variola), the establishment of educational programs, and participation in cultural festivals, all aimed at self-narration and identity reformation.

While Pardhi communities have also received support from local NGOs such as Muskan, their public image remains heavily burdened by the colonial stigma of criminality. Their community struggles have thus been more focused on accessing basic rights, protection from police brutality and legal aid rather than on larger cultural revival or public visibility.

### **3. Welfare Access and Bureaucratic Hurdles**

The Narikkuravars newly acquired ST status positions them for improved access to state welfare schemes and affirmative action programs. Previously, under the MBC category, they struggled to access scholarships, health benefits and housing schemes due to administrative neglect.

The Pardhi community, on the other hand, continues to face significant challenges due to inconsistent caste classification across states and bureaucratic inefficiencies in issuing identity documents. This has made it difficult for many Pardhis to access welfare benefits or be counted accurately in government records. Consequently, they remain excluded from formal development initiatives.

In sum, while both the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities share a colonial legacy of criminalization and ongoing marginalization, their postcolonial trajectories diverge in important ways. The Narikkuravars have leveraged political mobilization and cultural advocacy to gain greater recognition and access, whereas the Pardhis continue to grapple with more entrenched forms of exclusion and state repression. This comparison underscores the need to recognize internal heterogeneity within Denotified Tribes and the importance of region-specific policy interventions tailored to each community's unique historical and socio-political context.

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## Contemporary Struggles and Assertion

### 1. Recent Legal and Political Mobilizations

Denotified Communities (DNTs), including the Narikkuravar and Pardhi, continue to engage in significant legal and political mobilizations to address the enduring legacies of colonial criminalization. A landmark example is the Narikkuravar community's decades-long struggle for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in Tamil Nadu. This protracted campaign involved sustained petitions to state and central governments, coordinated delegations to Delhi, and hunger strikes at Jantar Mantar demonstrating a remarkable commitment to formal recognition and legal redress. Their efforts culminated in December 2022, when both Houses of Parliament approved their reclassification, with presidential assent granted in January 2023. This shift holds the promise of improved access to constitutional entitlements, including reservations in education and employment, and represents a critical step toward addressing historical socio-economic marginalization.

In contrast, the Pardhi community in Madhya Pradesh continues to grapple with more direct and violent forms of state repression. The alleged custodial torture and death of Deva Pardhi in Guna district in 2024 is emblematic of ongoing structural harassment. The Supreme Court of India strongly indicted the Madhya Pradesh Police for procedural failures and attempts to obstruct justice in this case. The criminalization of community members such as Gangaram Pardhi, a key eyewitness who was allegedly implicated in false cases, highlights the enduring use of legal systems to suppress dissent. Activists and legal advocates have also opposed discriminatory state directives including a 2024 order mandating heightened surveillance of nomadic tribes arguing that such measures perpetuate colonial-era practices under the guise of modern governance. These contemporary struggles underscore Foucault's notion of biopolitical control, where the state continues to regulate and pathologize marginalized populations through surveillance, classification and coercion.

Calls to repeal the Habitual Offenders Act (1952) a postcolonial legal instrument that continues the logic of the Criminal Tribes Act have intensified. Advocates argue that this Act re-inscribes colonial stigmas and obstructs genuine reintegration of DNTs into civil society.

### 2. Community Organizations and Youth Mobilization

Community-based organizations have played a pivotal role in amplifying the political agency of DNTs. The Narikkuravar Seva Sangham, founded in 1996 and later leading to the formation of the Narikkuravar Welfare Board in 2008, has focused on improving access to education, healthcare, and housing. Similarly, organizations like ECONET and the Nomad Resource Centre (NRC) in Maharashtra work across DNT communities to build awareness of rights, assist with legal documentation, and promote livelihood initiatives. Importantly, youth-led movements have emerged as powerful vehicles of transformation. ECONET's Youth and Women Leadership Programme mobilizes young community members to articulate their economic, educational, and political aspirations. In Bhopal, the MAJAL collective, formed by young Pardhi individuals, fosters critical dialogue and community engagement through theatre, libraries, and peer-led discussions. Their efforts challenge internal patriarchy and promote educational continuity. These forms of grassroots activism exemplify subaltern political agency, pushing back against exclusionary state narratives and reasserting the right to self-definition.

### 3. Cultural Revival, Media and Educational Interventions

Cultural revival has become an important axis of resistance for DNT communities. Oral histories, folk performance, and traditional arts are being actively reclaimed to resist the dehumanizing labels historically imposed upon them. These cultural practices serve not only as vehicles of identity preservation but also as counter-narratives to dominant representations of DNTs as dangerous or deviant. Parallel to cultural efforts, education has emerged as a critical front in the struggle for dignity and inclusion. The Narikkuravar Education and Welfare Society (NEWS), operating since 1990, has established residential schools offering food, care and continuity in education particularly crucial given the migratory patterns of many families. In Madhya Pradesh, organizations like Muskan support Pardhi children's educational journeys, with increasing numbers becoming first-generation college students.

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These programs challenge not only the material effects of marginalization but also the symbolic erasure of DNTs from mainstream educational narratives. Importantly, these initiatives reflect what Goffman would describe as “stigma management” community-driven efforts to reshape how they are seen by the state and society. Through education, arts, and media, DNTs are actively dislodging their colonial identities and constructing affirmative representations of self.

### Academia, Policy and the Road Ahead

The role of academic research and state policy is increasingly recognized as critical in supporting the trajectories of DNT communities. Studies rooted in socio-anthropological and participatory frameworks are essential to accurately identify, classify and support DNTs especially given the inconsistencies in caste and tribe classification across different Indian states.

#### **The Renke Commission (2008) and the Ideate Commission (2014) have recommended:**

- Extending reservations to all DNTs.
- Applying the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.
- Addressing barriers to access, such as lack of documentation and bureaucratic apathy.

While schemes like the Scheme for Economic Empowerment of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (SEED) represent steps in the right direction, implementation remains inconsistent. Academic institutions and researchers have a vital role to play in bridging the gap between policy intent and on-the-ground outcomes by generating data, documenting oral histories, and facilitating inclusive policymaking. The call for exclusive research institutes and training centres for DNTs is also gaining ground, as a means of ensuring sustained institutional focus. These collaborations between academia, activists, and state actors are key to dismantling residual colonial legacies and enabling full citizenship, inclusion, and justice for Denotified Tribes.

### CONCLUSION

The historical criminalization of the Narikkuravar and Pardhi communities under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) was not merely a matter of law enforcement but a broader colonial strategy to discipline mobility, suppress indigenous autonomy, and extract labour. By branding entire communities as inherently criminal, the colonial state imposed a stigma that transcended legal repeal and continues to influence postcolonial governance and public perception. This paper has examined how such legal and administrative frameworks constructed hereditary criminality and how these logics remain embedded in contemporary policing, welfare access, and social exclusion. Through a comparative analysis of the Narikkuravar in Tamil Nadu and the Pardhi in Madhya Pradesh, the study has highlighted both commonalities and regional differences in their historical trajectories and current struggles. While both communities faced state violence, forced sedentarization, and occupational disruption, their responses diverged shaped by local politics, civil society engagement, and access to institutional platforms. The Narikkuravar’s successful campaign for Scheduled Tribe status and the Pardhi’s continued resistance to police brutality illustrate the uneven terrains of legal recognition and social justice.

Drawing on theoretical insights from Labelling Theory, Foucauldian biopolitics, and Subaltern Studies, the paper argues that DNTs are not passive victims of state categorization, but active agents engaged in reshaping their identities, asserting cultural pride, and demanding institutional accountability. Education, youth leadership, media engagement, and grassroots mobilization are central to this transformation. Addressing the historical injustice faced by Denotified Tribes requires more than legal reclassification, it demands dismantling deep-rooted social stigmas and ensuring equitable access to rights and representation. As DNTs continue to assert their place in Indian society, it is imperative that academic research, policymaking, and civil society action work collaboratively to support their journey from criminalized subjects to full citizens.

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